Neanderthal Dig

Don McKay
from *Larix*

by

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Neanderthal Dig

1.

When we dug up the grave
we found a child’s bones
laid on a great swan’s wing.
They had never been, we thought,
the sharpest flints in the cave,
with thick skulls evolving toward NFL
helmets. We’d applied their name
(from Neander Vale, site
of the first remains we found)
to racists, sexists, and dull
bureaucrats.

Now we stood abashed
trespassers on grief, thoroughly sapiens
with artful implements and wit.
What would it be like to be so stricken,
with few words to call on heaven, hell,
hope, grief? And what
sharp words might we, the clever cousins
muster for the child who one
day watched a Mute Swan (wingspan:
five feet) lift from the river in two white
swipes of Paleolithic air?
2. What manner of wreath
   might honour this death?
   Some wing of language
   entering earth?

   Wherever you’re gone
   may your spirit wander
   wild as a swan
   in the Vale of Neander.
DON McKay has published numerous books of poetry and several books of essays. The poetry has been recognized with a number of awards, including two Governor General’s Awards and the Griffin Poetry Prize. His most recent books of essays, The Shell of the Tortoise, received the BMO Winterset Award for Excellence in Newfoundland and Labrador Writing for 2011. Paradoxides is his most recent publication. His collected poems, Angular Uniformity, appeared in 2014. He lives in St. John’s, Newfoundland. “Neanderthal Dig” is from Lexis, Vallum Chapbook Series No. 18, Montreal, Quebec, 2015.

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